The

Pentad

(*mukhammas*)

Of

Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1898)

Translated

By

Wahid Azal

Introduction

The lengthy *mukhammas* (pentad)—a classical Persian poetic form composed of five-line stanzas—translated below belongs to Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh (c. 1835–1898): a pivotal figure of late Qājār-era Sufism and a leading master of the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi order.[1] Born Mirzā Ḥasan Isfahānī, he later assumed the spiritual title of Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh (the Purity of King ʿAlī) and established a major *khānāqāh* (Sufi hospice) in Tehran, gathering numerous disciples across different social strata. Among one of his disciples was the Ismāʿīlī Imām, ʿAlī Shāh Aghā Khān II (d. 1885), whom he met and was hosted by during his travels to India. Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh left behind a substantial poetic and doctrinal legacy, including mystical treatises and a complete Qurʾān commentary put to Persian verse, all animated by themes of divine love, ontological transformation, and the annihilation of the ego before the Beloved.

The poem at hand is an extended address delivered in the divine—or spiritually authoritative—voice to the seeker. Its tone is both intimate and uncompromising: the speaker promises to strip away illusions, dismember the self in metaphorical fire, uproot worldly desires, and wrench the soul through successive stations of death, humility, bewilderment, and illumination. In typical Persian Sufi fashion, it articulates a spiritual itinerary that moves from material existence through vegetal and animal stages to the human spirit, and beyond that toward union, effacement, and reintegration in the realm of divine proximity. The poem continuously invokes themes of coercive love, trial and humiliation, the burning away of selfhood, paradoxical rebirth, and the dissolution of "I" and "we" in the face of the Absolute. Figures like Abraham, Jonah, Ḥallāj, and and the sixth Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq appear not as ornaments, but as spiritual paradigms of sacrifice, subsistence, and ecstatic utterance.

The structure of the poem, with its fifty-four (**54**) stanzas of five lines each (per most of the current editions of Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh's *dīvān* of poetry),[2] allows for a cumulative

[1] For a reasonably well written account in English, see Nile Green "*A Persian Sufi in British India: The Travels of Mīrzā Ḥasan Ṣafī ʿAlī Shāh (1251/1835-1316/1899)*," Iran, vol. 42 (British Institute of Persian Studies: Oxford, 2004): 201-218.

[2] *Dīvān-i-Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh* (Amīr Kabīr: Tehran, 1363): 220-31; see also online,

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rhetorical force. The fifty-four (**54**) stanzas in itself appears to also have a lettrist purpose, since it is the numerical value of the Divine Name *muwadid* (مودد): one who endears love or affection. Repetition of first-person divine verbs—"I will bind," "I will burn," "I will take," "I will raise"—underscores the inexorability of the soul's transformation under divine agency. The aspirant is alternately rebuked, enticed, annihilated, resurrected, instructed, and crowned. Imagery of breath, fire, dust, gardens, veils, hunger, blood, and execution evokes both terror and intimacy, echoing Qur'ānic cadences and the symbolic ecologies of medieval Sufism. The entire piece balances between metaphysical instruction and impassioned invocation, reading at once as a esoteric discourse and a spiritual assault on complacency.

Our English rendering presented here aims to preserve both the meaning and the mystical intensity of the original while employing a poetic diction that evokes the resonance of older sacred English—specifically the register associated with the King James Bible and early English devotional verse. Each stanza is translated into a rhymed five-line unit, echoing the sonic cohesion of the Persian *mukhammas* without forcibly replicating its original rhyme-words or quantitative meter. Archaic pronouns and inversion of syntax are used strategically to retain a sense of gravity and intimacy, but the lines are shaped for clarity and coherence rather than strict word-for-word literalism. When necessary, slight expansions or compressions have been introduced to maintain rhythmic flow or reproduce the rhetorical force of a line whose Persian idiom resists direct transplantation. The resulting translation is not a gloss but a re-voicing—intensely faithful in spiritual logic, imagery, and tone, yet flexible enough in surface expression to operate as a living English poem. By preserving the poem's relentless movement from coercion to surrender, from multiplicity to unity, and from egohood to obliteration, the translation seeks to open for the reader something of the original's esoteric impetus. What emerges is a long mystical drama in which the Divine simultaneously ravages and redeems, breaks and perfects, humiliates and crowns, until nothing remains of the seeker but the breath and will of the Beloved.

We first translated this **Pentad** in full during late 1997 at the request of the then Dutch based master of the Niʿmatullāhī-Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāhī Sufi Order then resident in Holland.

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https://ganjoor.net/safi/divan/mosammat/sh4 (retrieved 30 September 2025).

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That draft has now evolved into the current translation found here below. During its early stages in 1997, our full-length draft sought the input of Carl Ernst and the late Frank D. Lewis who were gracious with their advice.

English translation of

The Pentad

Of

Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh

(**1**) O heart, I yearn to make thee lost in thy Beloved's sight,
To turn thy breast the mirror of Its face's hidden light,
To make thee mad for that moon-visage, dazzled with delight,
To bind thee in the snare of those curled tresses, dark as night,
And drown thee in love's tribulation, in Its ruin and Its might!

(**2**) Till thou wander exiled from all city, kin, and land,
Till thou be estranged from self and blood, unable to withstand,
Till thou shatter reason's fetters and choice slips from thy hand,
Till like a madman thou set thy head upon the desert sand—
Then will I bind thee captive in thy dear one's curling strand!

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(3) Last night, when from my place my self had slipped away,
There came that Peerless Beauty, my fair book of hidden lay;
From the lowliness of "I" to the loftiness of "I" did It convey,
Saying, "Who is this, in love, that brings disgrace my way?
I long to strip thy being till it's light as breath and clay!

(4) If of the Path thou longest yet to make thy breath and claim,
Then set thy foot upon the world and trample all its frame,
Not by greed to wreck the world or cast its ranks to shame,
But by stifling worldly longing and desire's smoky flame—
Then shall I make thee heir to boundless favors in My Name!

(5) Look within thyself an hour—what art thou, and from where?
Whence thy root and what thy dwelling, why this sojourn in the air?
For what portion of this fleeting world didst thou thy lifetime spare?
Strike thy hoard of being down upon the anvil of 'not-there',
That from thy reckoning I raise thee, to wisdom laid bare!

(6) Thou wast naught in the first dawn, unseen and out of sight;
I willed that nothingness should taste the gift of Being's Light,
So first I shaped thee stone from My pure bounty's Might;
But should'st thou gaze upon thyself and make that 'self' thy right,
I'll bind thee fast within the snare of thine own ego's plight!

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(**7**) From lifeless dust I lifted thee, then cast thee into green,
And there I fed thee life and breath where budding shoots are seen;
I cheered thee with the breeze of care, with turning and with preen;
But if thou linger in the thorn-field of the body, unredeemed,
I'll draw thee back once more to the garden where thou hadst been!

(**8**) When as plant thou cam'st to fullness and hadst reached thy destined goal,
I breathed in thee the bestial breath and joined it to thy soul;
With that lower breath thou movest, in hunger and in dole—
But if thou boast of mind and mastery, calling reason thine in whole,
I'll stun thee blind and burn thee in that faithless breath's control!

(**9**) When thou wert ripe for self-effacement in the depths of thine abode,
I breathed in thee the human soul, a spark of My own code;
I taught thee gnosis and the path where secret meanings flow'd,
I bound thee to the charge of deeds where compensation's owed—
That, like Myself, in act and choice thou mightest bear the mode!

(**10**) Yet once again I'll lead thee forth and wheel thee in the sky,
I'll open unto thee the Real and lift the veils thereby,
I'll free thee from the race of man, its claim I will deny,
I'll fix thee in another sphere where wandering hopes may die,
And there I'll set thee as a point that roams the zenith high!

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(11) From My breath, though thou wert naught, I made thee something be;
Thou wast as dead, yet life I gave and stirred thy veins in thee.
But how wouldst thou know voluntary death’s deep mystery,
Until from thine own “being” thou be wholly rendered free?
Then shall I teach thee of the soul’s abiding ecstasy!

(12) If thou longest for the refuge of God’s sure sanctuary,
Know that My shelter is found in utter poverty;
Be a pauper in the station of bleak loneliness and plea,
Though thy nature, like base copper, still seeks gold’s alchemy—
I’ll make of souls the Philosopher’s Stone and transmute thee secretly!

(13) Since in one breath thou didst remember Me—of this I am assured—
I opened wide for thee the Gate of Meaning, swift and unobscured;
I granted thee thy liberty, with freedom’s line secured—
But if in pride thou boast, “I am free!” with selfhood reassured,
Without a doubt, I’ll snare thee fast in thine own self-absorbed accord!

(14) Since I made thee know the Path and showed its subtle line,
And in thy journeying I walked as comrade close, benign,
Till thy road touched My own end, where secret goals align—
If then thou think’st thyself the master of the Way divine,
I’ll cast thee, in thy heedlessness, headlong from that sign!

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(**15**) If thou seekest of Me the breath of love, O son of inward flame,
I shall breathe such breath that thou, like Adam, dost ascend in frame;
Then, like the kings, I'll crown thy head and set thee up by Name—
But if thou growest proud thereof, exalting in thy fame,
I'll seize that crown and bind thee with its reins in humbled shame!

(**16**) How long shalt thou keep turning in thine orbit self-possessed,
Like the silkworm in its cocoon, O child of no true rest?
Know'st thou not that an age in vain is one by folly blessed?
If twice thou stray'st from faith's true road in earnest or in jest,
In a single breath I'll yoke thee as an ox at the press, distressed!

(**17**) I desire thee freed from body's chain and mortal appetite,
Yet thou know'st naught but cherishing the flesh with all thy might;
So I'll make this head of thine a head of other sight,
And every hour I'll spread for thee a bed of sorrow's blight,
Till I coerce thee to the deathbed where compulsion ends the fight!

(**18**) Till thou yield thyself obedient to the Elder's dread command,
Like a lifeless prey within the lion's ruthless hand;
Till thou canst not flee the chosen death that lovers understand,
I'll raise thee up at whiles, at whiles cast down where thou must stand,
At times leave thee breadless, at times strike thee sick and unmanned!

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(19) While thy rebellious being is yet unbaked and raw,
I’ll draw thee from the flame, then cast thee back with awe;
I shall burn thy rancorous brain, its fumes and faults withdraw,
Till cleansed and cooked I bring thee forth from every subtle flaw,
And with the wine of rapture make thee wake to sober awe!

(20) At times I'll hang thee on the gallows of annihilation high,
At times with dust or blood I’ll mix thee, leaving none to cry;
At times upon the soil of shame thy humbled brow shall lie,
At times within affliction’s sieve I’ll shake thee till thou sigh—
That from thy mortal span I wean thee and bid the self to die!

(21) So long as breath remains in thee—O wonder, mark it well—
Each breath shall bear thy soul up to the threshold of its spell;
At every moment I shall cast thee into fever’s rise and fell,
Nor grant thee rest a single blink from toil’s relentless knell,
That from the sleep of death I wake thee and thy slumber quell!

(22) While in thy frame remains one spark of being’s passing breath,
I’ll seize it, making thee as naught, unfit for worldly heft;
And every leaf thou openest from this ledger, calm or deft,
I’ll roll it up and fold it shut, unlining all that’s left—
Till, like a scroll, I twist thee round thyself in mirrored theft!

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(23) If of spirit thou shalt speak, or of the body's mortal hold,
Yet naught thou utterest but "we" and "I," so brazen and so bold;
Till thou behold no other "I" nor "we" in any mold,
I'll render thee struck dumb and deaf and blind through sorrows manifold,
And in thy speech I'll make thee but a wall of figures cold!

(24) O moon, I'll saddle thee as though the sun were but thy beast of load,
I'll strike and scatter all thy state, thy dwelling and abode;
Since thy soul is bound to bread on which thy cravings bode,
I'll seize that bread, that from thy breast the spirit may explode—
And fit thee for the fleshly doom where carrion is bestowed!

(25) Shouldst thou turn thy face from Me, toward the people's fleeting sight,
I'll turn thee from the specter of mankind's reflected light;
I'll make the folk do ill with thee, and spoil thy manner quite,
I'll cause regret to seize thy tongue in all their talk and spite,
Till from both friend and stranger thou despair and take no delight!

(26) And though a thousand heads wert thou possessed of in thy clay,
I'll crush them all at once beneath affliction's stony sway;
Till one survives of all those forms thou didst array,

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Like Manṣūr’s self I’ll cast thy head beneath My feet that day,
And on the scaffold of thy corpse thy vanquished flesh I’ll lay!

(27) Till I set thy flesh and spirit in the blaze of burning fire,
And scorch thy house with flames of might and majesty’s fierce ire;
I’ll make “I am the Truth!” pour from thy tongue in zeal entire,
Then stone-shower thee upon the gallows, raised yet higher—
And as with Ḥallāj, I’ll cloak thy secret in that pyre!

(28) If on the path of love thy foot in fervent step is bound,
And thou hast pierced the Sufis’ lore where secrets rise profound,
Then lay thy head where wine is poured and self is never found,
That in such wise, where ego dies and souls by truth abound,
I’ll raise thee for all living hearts a standard and a sound!

(29) Shouldst thou in worldly aims perform devotion’s outer show,
Naught shall remain for thee but mercy’s gift I still bestow,
For thou art yet provided for when shares on men bestow;
But if by acts devout thou seek’st the garden’s promised glow,
Then upside down I’ll cast thee in the fire thou didst not know!

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(30) If in remembrance thou dost crave My radiance from above,
Thou art a lover of the light, yet not of Me in love;
Thou standest outside the band whom true affection move—
But if in truth thou turn a leaf within My tome thereof,
I’ll make thee source of rays and states no mortal can remove!

(31) At times thou speakest shirk, at times of virtue’s grace,
Now of Ka‘bah dost thou prate, now a cloistered dwelling place;
Now thou bindest heart to *dhikr*, now stray’st to heedless chase—
But if from Me thou part not for a single breath or space,
In the realm of My subduing I’ll make thee One in every case!

(32) Now upon body falls thy gaze, now on the soul’s domain,
Now with the eyes of idols’ thralls thou lookest with disdain;
Like Brahmin set on sculptured gods, to this and that thou’rt fain—
So long as thou on “this” and “that” dost cast thy roving pain,
In every sight and vision I shall make thee low and vain!

(33) Now thou fall’st in love with rose, now with the narcissus fair,
Now with velvet dost thou dote, now with silks of princely air;
At times thou lov’st My portal like a beggar stripped and bare,
Yet heedless of Me, any face or form thy heart will snare—
So I shall mock thee in each marketplace and town’s loud glare!

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(**34**) Now for rank and wealth thou yearnest, now for life that shall not die,
Now for what is possible thou pinest, now for dreams awry;
Each breath a different fancy holds, each whim a transient sigh—
Therefore in no thought of thine will any grief ally,
And I shall turn thee friendless in thy mind’s unceasing lie!

(**35**) At last, step one stride past thyself, from selfhood take thy leave,
Cast off these windy fantasies that in thy skull bedeave;
Leave the world’s delight to ox and ass its honeycomb to thieve,
Pray one prayer with Ja‘far’s craving—yearning past reprieve—
So in love’s eternal garden I shall lift thee and retrieve!

(**36**) How long in sloth wilt thou remain? Arise and enter deed!
This is no hour for drunken slumber—wake to sober heed;
Thy sleep is death, beware, awake from mortal trance and need;
The caravan is gone ahead—take up thy pack with speed,
That with the traveling saints and friends I may thy soul proceed!

(**37**) Beast of burden from this station, O my soul, my father’s son,
For this desert is but terror’s realm where perils all are spun;
Shouldst thou tarry here alone, thy blood shall spilled be and undone,

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Thereafter grief shall strike thy head when solace is all gone—
My task is this: to tell thee so, that thou mayst not be won!

(**38**) Give ear of heart, O youth, unto the Elder's chiding word,
Enter the sea of trial bound with him whose voice is heard;
When was the soul undone by him whose bond the wise preferred?
If thou from life becomest bound to him, by longing stirred,
From every mortal's claim on thee I'll free thee undeterred!

(**39**) O soul, my child, from peril's snare and all misfortune's snare,
Thou hast no refuge save in Me—no path but My repair;
Go not forth from My ship of aid, nor cast thy trust elsewhere,
That like Abraham and Jonah, O my son of fragile air,
I may guard thee from the fire and the waters of despair!

(**40**) Though steeped in sin and wrongdoing thou hast squandered all thy days,
And spent thy fleeting life in self's bewildering malaise,
Yet if thou seek the shelter of My mercy's hidden ways,
I'll make thee blithely pardoned by the Lord whom awe obeys,
And for mankind's offence I'll grant forgiveness in thy praise!

(**41**) Though in My Presence' banquet thou, O pauper, takest place,
Though in My Manifestation's court thou seest now My face,
Though drowned within the sea of light thou findest some embrace—

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Yet know from Me thy distance still, O needy one and base,
Else from the fount of vision I shall bar thee in disgrace!

(42) Shorten speech—be servant here, within My sacred street,
So by heart's eye, like Moses, thou shalt see My visage sweet;
Thou'lt rise from death like Jesus stirred by fragrance that is Meet,
And if in love thou turn'st thy face to Me with zeal complete,
In the station of My nearness I shall summon thee to greet!

(43) Count each breath a treasure won, for this world is but one breath;
He who keeps My breath as comrade is true Adam, not in death;
Seek thy breath from Me, for Adam's life sprang from My breath;
The grace of both worlds dwells within the sphere where spirit saith—
Breath by breath, with My own breath, I'll be thy helper 'til death!

(44) I am the Master of the Breath in this revolving age,
Indeed in every cycle's realm I am the Soul's true sage;
I am the Gate of Knowledge, the Point of Gnosis' page,
That which no fancy can contain—that One, from gauge to gauge—
In meaning's sea I sink thee deep, beyond all thoughts that rage!

(45) Though from all form and meaning I am loosed in My ascent,
And absolute before the minds of sages reverent;
Yet for guiding humankind I descend with full intent,

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Each moment My Essence takes on a form benevolent—
So through that form I make thee reap what meaning's heaven meant!

(**46**) To all the Prophets in their rank of prophecy I lead,
To all the Saints in guardianship I am the chief indeed;
To Muṣṭafā I am the cousin and the helper in his need—
I am Ḥaydar, I am Ḥaydar, I am Ḥaydar in full creed;
Now of thy innermost secret shall I give thee certain heed!

(**47**) In every age I shine anew in garments manifold,
In this hour I don the cloak of mercy uncontrolled;
I am ‘Alī, the Mercy-clad, of power strong and bold—
If thou in soul becom’st a beggar, yearning to behold,
O chosen one, I’ll make of thee Light of All Lights untold!

(**48**) In My traits I am the Mercy for the worlds in every land,
In My beauty I am the Giver of compassion on demand;
In My majesty I’m the Sovereign of the Judgment Day at hand,
At the portal of “Thee we worship, from Thee alone we stand,”
From idol-centers I shall cleanse thee, loathing their command!

(**49**) I am the Straight Path—heed My call, for all else leads astray,
Whatever is not Me is but a false and crooked way;

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One glance from Me redeems thee more than a hundred fasts can sway,
So with a single heart entreat Me in "guide us" when you pray,
That on the road made right and clear I keep thy feet to stay!

(**50**) Lest the banished fiend should bear thee off and cast thee in his scheme,
O my brother, hold fast the Straight Path's center-line supreme;
Speak in My Name with neither dread nor trembling in thy theme,
Breathe "*bismillah al-Raḥmān al-raḥīm*"—a seal and gleam—
So from the wicked and their evils I shall guard thee like a beam!

(**51**) I am the talisman of unseen, the treasure hid in "No,"
When thou reachest to that treasure, none but Me dost thou bestow;
For I am higher than "except" and "not"—beyond their show,
I am the Point that speaks with "Bā," the first the Letters know—
Behold the One, that I may make thee conscious what thou sow!

(**52**) Who is the Manifest of marvels? Lo, 'tis I alone;
Who is the source of mysteries hid, of secrets all My own?
Who is the aid in trials fierce, the helper yet unknown?
In truth the Essence Necessary, I and none but I am shown—
I'll set thy crooked thought aright and make thy pathway known!

(**53**) If from Myself I breathe but once, a little breath I cast,
The slippery mind will fall in doubt, confounded and aghast;

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Know this at least, if thou hast wit and vision sure and fast:

Among a thousand souls, scarce one shall see the truth at last—

But if thou doubtest, I shall bind thy fancy in its past!

(**54**) The night is past, O nightingale, disordered in thy song;

Behold the rose, and leave behind the clamor of the throng.

Stand astonished for a moment at My beauty, still and strong,

Like the parrot dumb before the mirror, silent all along—

Till with praise of Me I feed thee sugar, sweet upon thy tongue!”

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